

Achieving workplace wellness

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Recognizing the evolving needs of employees and merging them with the organization's corporate vision is what sets the 2008 Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For apart from their peers.

By Jennifer Goupil, P.E.

Structural Engineer honors Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For 2008

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As the corporate culture of today's firms strives to develop the work/life balance that its employees are demanding, a number of new policies and practical procedures have surfaced, significantly altering the way we do business.

The participants

The sixth annual Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For ranking is the result of participation from a record 63 firms, up from 49 in 2007. With 23 new applicants, 11 of which rank in the Top 25, competition this year was intense. Unlike other annual ranking programs—such as those for colleges or business schools—this program evaluates participants against all others who applied. With a 22-percent increase in participants, the high bars set in the past have been raised even higher; see the Top 25 and Honorable Mention firms below.

What kind of firms are these? With anywhere from one to 120 years in business, 74 percent of applicant firms are privately-held, with an average of 15 owners. More than 19 employees on average joined these firms last year, whose total sizes range from 10 to 1,500 employees. Firms are based in 27 states across the country, and one in Canada.

Of the firms that made the lists this year, 40 percent report an average annual growth of 10 to 19 percent, while 27 percent report an annual average growth of 20 to 29 percent; as many as 21 percent reported an average annual growth of 30 percent or greater.

What makes these firms so special? These firms go above and beyond what may be typical or expected in the current market place. For example, staff salaries are reportedly reviewed annually by 70 percent of applicant firms, while 22 percent say they review salaries every six months. Eighty-six percent of applicant firms report offering employees some type of contribution to their 401(k) programs. Additionally, 70 percent of this year's applicant firms offer flex time and another 13 percent offer telecommuting for all employees, while 24 percent and 62 percent of organizations allow select, high-level staff members to take advantage of flex time and telecommuting, respectively.

Such high-caliber firms are constantly seeking to improve their practices. To this end, some firms have created Flexible Fridays during the summer months, giving employees an alternate three-day weekend, while others have initiated employee appreciation events and added additional personal or vacation days to their calendars. One firm even acquired a second vacation home for employee use! Read "[Creating more with less](#)" to learn more about the out-of-box ideas that are being implemented by these top-notch firms.

New to this year's program, five firms have been recognized for highest achievements in "[At the top](#)." Read on to discover what it means to be considered one of the Best Structural Engineering Firms To Work For.

The process

The application period for the Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For list began in February. Firms completed an online form known as the Corporate Survey and invited their staff to complete an Employee Survey executed by ZweigWhite. Firms were told to achieve a 20-percent minimum response rate for the

anonymous survey. Next, ZweigWhite staff graded the Corporate and Employee Surveys, which make up the two equally weighted components of the grading process, and subsequently ranked the firms. Information about the top three firms was reviewed by a judging panel, who determined their final ranks. For a more detailed description of the application and grading process, go to www.gostructural.com/bestfirm.

The 2008 Best Structural Engineering Firms To Work For list is as follows:

RANK	FIRM	HEADQUARTERS	EMPLOYEES	WEBSITE
1	Hage Engineering	New York	14	www.hageengineering.com
2	Walter P Moore	Houston	412	www.walterpmoore.com
3	Matrix Structural Engineers	Houston	21	www.matrixstructural.com
4	Beaudette Consulting Engineers / BCE	Missoula, Mont.	32	www.bceweb.com
5	PCS Structural Solutions	Seattle	57	www.pcs-structural.com
6	Barrish, Pelham & Associates	Sacramento, Calif.	20	www.barrish.com
7	KL&A Inc.	Golden, Colo.	47	www.klaa.com
8	ARW Engineers	Ogden, Utah	24	www.arwengineers.com
9	Simpson Gumpertz & Heger	Waltham, Mass.	365	www.sgh.com
10	Pruitt Eberly Stone, Inc.	Atlanta	60	www.pesengineers.com
11	Gregory P. Luth & Associates	Santa Clara, Calif.	10	www.gplainc.com
12	Halvorson and Partners, P.C.	Chicago	45	www.halvorsonandpartners.com
13	Little	Charlotte, N.C.	325	www.littleonline.com
14	Ehlert/Bryan, Inc.	Mc Lean, Va.	35	www.ehlert-bryan.com
15	Jaster-Quintanilla LLP	Austin, Texas	110	www.jqeng.com
16	Degenkolb Engineers	San Francisco	136	www.degenkolb.com
17	The DiSalvo Ericson Group	Ridgefield, Conn.	19	www.tdeg.com
18	Cary Kopczynski & Company	Bellevue, Wash.	30	www.ckcps.com
19	Felten Group, Inc.	Phoenix	30	www.feltengroup.com
20	Jirsa-Hedrick & Associates	Denver	17	www.jirsa-hedrick.com
21	Mulhern & Kulp Structural Engineering	Ambler, Pa.	17	www.mulhernkulp.com
22	Magnusson Klemencic Associates	Seattle	158	www.mka.com
23	The Harman Group	King Of Prussia, Pa.	56	www.HarmanGroup.com
24	Finley Engineering Group, Inc.	Tallahassee, Fla.	14	www.finleyengineeringgroup.com
25	S.A. Miro, Inc.	Denver	61	www.samiro.com

RANK	FIRM	HEADQUARTERS	EMPLOYEES	WEBSITE
HM	Baldrige & Associates Structural Eng.	Honolulu	20	www.basengr.com
HM	Reaveley Engineers + Associates, Inc.	Salt Lake City	44	www.reaveley.com
HM	Steven Schaefer Associates	Cincinnati	60	www.ssastructural.com
HM	Timothy Haahs & Associates	Blue Bell, Pa.	47	www.timhaahs.com

Overall ranking

First place—In its debut on the list, **Hage Engineering**, headquartered in New York, takes highest rank as the Best Structural Engineering Firm to Work For in 2008. Established in 1990, Hage provides commercial, residential, cultural, institutional, special structures, and art services to its clients. With just 14 current employees, this small, Manhattan-based firm makes a big splash.

Known for its dedication to staff members, Hage maintains a unique office atmosphere that promotes communication and understanding among employees and senior staff, with an open-door policy and a mentoring program where managers on up to the CEO mentor, train, and work one-on-one with employees.

"The [firm's] open-door communication exudes a high level of job satisfaction, with the ability to reach the leadership of the organization, as well as the various levels of staff," said Judge Barbara H. Irwin, principal, HR Advisors Group, LLC. "It is also an effective tool used to keep in touch and engaged with the workforce of the firm."

While firms recognize the importance in valuing their clients, they don't always appreciate their employees in the same fashion. Hage is exceptional in this way.

"The general wisdom these days is that instead of putting 'customers first,' company's put 'employees first'," said Judge Gerri King, Ph.D., president, Human Dynamics Associates, Inc., Concord, N.H. "Happy and satisfied employees result in happy and satisfied customers. When firms 'hire right' and treat their staffs right, clients benefit enormously. I have the sense that Hage lives this mission."

Hage extends this work/life balance both inside and outside of the office by encouraging work and involvement in the arts and humanities in addition to providing community services. The firm also offers telecommuting, flex-time, and an annual average of 40 days of PTO without a time trigger. Most significant, however, is that Hage actually discourages its employees from working more than five hours a month in overtime.

In this and other ways, Hage is an "out-of-the-box and unconventional engineering firm in all areas of the business," said Judge Shaw-chin Chiu, a consultant with Chicago-based ZweigWhite. "[Hage] is particularly selective with the projects and clients they choose to work with; their business development approach is via developing an image and their design and project approach is artistically in line with their architectural clients."

Hage calls itself "a laboratory for ideas and innovation," stressing the creativity and originality they constantly strive to create within. Through a variety of different avenues, the firm provides employees an outlet to express themselves within their work as well.

"Creativity and innovation are a must in today's marketplace, and if the firm instills that creativity and innovation with its employees, the end result will be a better service to its clients and a productive and motivated staff," said Irwin.

Supporting the firm's high level of productivity is also its speed of computer hardware and software replacement. New computers are initiated every 18 months, while the firm reviews hardware and software capabilities every six months, updating as needed.

Featuring 100-percent paid dental and vision insurance for both employees and their families, and 100-percent paid employee and 90-percent paid family medical coverage, as well as maternity and paternity leave structures, Hage's benefits are just another way the firm shows its employees that they're valued.

"The benefits structure is good for any firm, but particularly impressive for a small firm," said Judge Bernie Siben, CPSM, principal consultant, The Siben Consult, LLC, Visalia, Calif. "My first impression on reading Hage's file was 'Wow! This is a firm I'd like to work for.'"

Second place—Houston-based **Walter P Moore** (WPM) maintains its hold on the lists' top echelon again, but down from its first-place ranking of the past three years. Established in 1931, WPM boasts 11 domestic offices and more than 400 employees and is therefore, the largest firm in the top three. The firm provides structural, infrastructure, parking, traffic, transportation, intelligent transportation systems, and research and development services to its clients.

Strong in staff training and development programs, WPM invests significantly in its employee's professional growth, even retaining a full-time director of organizational development as part of the firm's senior management team. The most notable series is the Fast Start Program, which offers graduate engineers an opportunity to be trained in the WPM way, jumpstarting their careers with the firm.

"The program is an effective initiative to engaging employees early in their careers, getting them interested in the organization's mission, vision, and overall career plan for their futures," said Irwin. "Offering not only technical programs but also management-level programs is an important factor in the development of an engineer's career. I applaud the firm for making an investment in their employees' development and growth because as a result, both the employees and the firm will continue to grow and prosper."

Keeping staff members abreast of the firm's current market position is yet another staff development initiative at WPM. The firm's CEO presents to the 11 nationwide offices monthly, disclosing the firm's financial standings, current projects, and more.

"The organization does a great job in keeping employees informed about what's happening in the organization, including providing financial updates on the status of the firm," said Irwin. "The more employees know and understand the business side of the firm, the more productive and committed they will be to the overall success of the organization."

The firm's wellness program is also a significant plus for employees, helping them create an appropriate work/life balance. "The firm believes in wellness at many different levels: physical, mental, financial, and legal," said Chiu. "For legal, they bring in attorneys to talk about issues such as wills. For physical wellness ... every Wednesday, each office gets six to nine boxes of fruit."

It's no wonder WPM maintains a 9-percent turnover rate. Impressive for any company, but particularly so for a large-sized firm, WPM is able to retain its employees by providing them with a number of outstanding benefits, including environmentally friendly office spaces, support for their favorite not-for-profit organizations with its employee charity donation matching program, designated paid time off for volunteering with use of company resources, and a number of company-sponsored events, including goal-oriented celebrations, staff and family outings, and more.

"Walter P Moore defies the myth that large firms cannot be inclusive, communicative, and fun," said King. "It is clear that they are also intent on serving their clients well by ensuring that their staff is continually well trained, kept abreast of the strategic plan, and dedicated to the larger community, both in volunteer efforts and adherence to a green philosophy."

Third place—Matrix Structural Engineers, Inc., headquartered in Houston, ranks third in this year's Top 25 structural engineering firms. Established in 1993, Matrix focuses the efforts of its 21 employees on K-12 and college and university educational facilities, retail, religious, healthcare, commercial, and other institutional buildings.

Holding monthly after-work events, staff athletic and entertainment outings, as well as family picnics, theme parks visits, and group sporting events, Matrix employees work and play as a team.

"Matrix employees describe their work environment as encouraging teamwork and supporting a family atmosphere," said King. "The research suggests that employees are more interested in that and in opportunities to learn and grow, which also seem prevalent at Matrix, as far more important than compensation. Maintaining a respectful atmosphere isn't easy when deadlines loom, but this firm seems to have accomplished that."

Matrix offers a number of training and development options for their staff as well, including in-house tutorials by outside consultants and fellow staff members, executive coaching, business and technical skills reviews, and an online training system.

The firm strives to get to know its clients as well, working to provide employees with an edge on the market. "The firm encourages professional involvement in not only professional engineering organizations, but in architectural associations as well, so that staff is able to identify with their client base," said Irwin.

Conclusion

Developing and supporting their employees is what the **Structural Engineer Best Structural Engineering Firms to Work For** do best. These firms recognize that when staff members feel valued, the organization itself will thrive—both internally, by way of enhanced collaboration and teamwork, and externally, with client approval and additional business generation.

Today's unstable economy has left many employees uncertain about their job security and employers cautious about spending. But, while this year's Top 25 structural engineering firms undoubtedly exist within these same financial constraints, many of them have found a way to put employees first and create more with less.

Reflecting on the past year, executives at one firm said, "Throughout the course of a very difficult and challenging financial year, we held fast to an on-going commitment to the current staff. We retained staff

members in spite of deep financial burdens, focusing attention on generating new work and clientele instead."

A testament to the extreme efforts of the Top 25 structural engineering firms, this example is striking, but not unique. Firms are also increasing employee benefits packages, expanding marketing and internal communications efforts, and enhancing the work/life balance of employees to boost staff morale and improve the corporate life. Following are a few of the most common improvements that structural engineering firms made in 2007:

Increased employee benefits packages—Many firms enhanced their benefits program to keep it competitive and attractive to both new and existing employees. One company increased its contribution to pre-existing family vision and dental plans, while another added dental insurance where there was none. One firm enhanced its insurance coverage by picking up 75 percent of all employee-dependant costs, while others initiated Health Savings Account and Health Reimbursement Account plans. Other firms added medical benefits for part-time employees, including those working a minimum of 20 to 30 hours per week. A number of firms increased their 401(k) matching programs as well. One firm now matches 4 percent of salary, up from 1 percent the previous year, while another organization currently matches up to 6 percent where it had not before. Yet another firm enhanced the availability of 401(k) funds for hardship situations, while one changed the 401(k) program waiting period for new employees, from one year down to just three months.

Expanded marketing/internal communications efforts — Image is everything, and the Top 25 structural engineering firms appreciate that how a business appears to its staff and clients matters more today than ever. Responding to this, many firms formed or expanded their marketing departments last year. More than one firm hired a business development/marketing director or coordinator who meets weekly with interested employees at all levels to create a vision for re-branding the firm's image, logo, and corporate website. Other firms have instituted daily, weekly, or monthly newsletters and company-wide intranet announcements.

Enhanced work/life balance of employees—Many firms are working to help employees merge their ever-so-busy work and home lives with a number of progressive initiatives. A number of organizations instituted a flexible schedule policy during the last year to allow employees to shuffle their schedules to accommodate young children or aging parents. One firm added company-affiliated day care services and yet another now subsidizes health club memberships. Others created monthly happy hours and company outings, while additional firms instituted employee appreciation events or a new break room with a flat screen TV. One firm even acquired a second vacation home for employee use—now that is an improvement!

In an effort to honor this year's structural engineering organizations for their individual successes independent of their overall ranking, the following new superlative categories have been created. Following are the 2008 winners:

Highest employee survey score: ARW Engineers

Employees at this firm are clearly very satisfied with their employer.

Best training program: Hage Engineering

Offering a formal mentoring/coaching program for new professional, technical, and administrative personnel at all levels, Hage Engineering promotes an enriched corporate environment for both new and seasoned staff members. Both its corporate university and in-house training and development programs offer business and technical skills training, vendor-sponsored product education, and site-safety instruction. Employees said that Hage offers them the opportunities they need to take their skills to the next level.

Best collaborative environment: Gregory P. Luth and Associates

Citing positive relationships among staff members, employees at Gregory P. Luth and Associates report not only a team-oriented, collaborative environment, but also a firm-wide caring, "family" atmosphere. Staff members describe a respect for staff diversity where employees of all backgrounds and personalities are

valued. With shared decision-making at all levels, the organization discloses its revenue and profit data annually to employees, showing them firsthand what it means to be a team player.

Best employee recognition program: Barrish, Pelham & Associates, Inc.

Barrish, Pelham & Associates rewards its employees for the following notable actions: business generation, technical excellence, overtime hours, excellent client service, getting published or speaking at an industry event, contribution to a charitable organization, and more. The firm offers deserving staff members extra vacation time, event tickets, gift certificates, and financial reimbursement to name a few. With firm-wide announcements at meetings or in the company newsletter, the honorees may receive public recognition for their efforts as well. Employees report a high level of satisfaction with the recognition of both team and individual performance at Barrish, Pelham & Associates.

Best recruiting and retention program: Matrix Structural Engineers, Inc.

As the greatest source of new firm hires last year, word-of-mouth referrals speak volumes for Matrix Structural Engineers. In their survey responses, firm employees site Matrix as an organization that both recruits and retains employees with its multitude of career growth and advancement opportunities, challenging work, and excellent benefits. In addition to typical practices of referral compensations upon firm hire, distribution of retention bonuses, and holiday and performance bonuses, Matrix also offers dedicated service awards, profit sharing options, sign-on bonuses, and unscheduled spot bonuses for individuals who go above and beyond the call of duty on a project.